

The Beginning

20 years of hard work, fun and achievement. It was hard to imagine all those years ago that Community Link would have accomplished so much. Back in 1988, new organizations had short shelf lives, due to a lack of funding sources, and when you factor in that Community Link was going to focus solely on gay issues, it is truly amazing that the organization made it past the 6 month mark.

The organization was founded by a very dedicated and diverse group of gay and lesbian community leaders at Bill Chin's Olive Tower Coffee Shop.

Often these individuals were at odds with each other and most of the time engaged in heated and spirited debates in how to best serve and promote the community.

But in February 1988, these adversarial leaders came together and rallied around Kay Vanderford, the founder and Executive Director of the Central Valley AIDS Team (CVAT). Ms. Vanderford had been terminated by Gay United Services (GUS) the parent organization of CVAT after many years of service.

From this adversity and chaos came the birth of a new organization, Community Link, whose focus would be on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. After many years of focusing on caring for those affected and infected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the LGBT community sought to redirect attention to other issues that were affecting us.

At the first community meeting a needs assessment and brain storming session was held and it was overwhelmingly evident that the LGBT community was on the move.

It was decided that a Community Center was needed and would provide a variety of services to the whole LGBT community.

The First Project

That first night saw the formation of the Gay and Lesbian Youth Group. At first young members named the group "Compass" to play off of the "Campus" Christian youth ministries at the local high schools. They felt that the closeness of the two names would give closeted youth some safe cover and if anyone learned of their attendance they would assume it was the Christian group.

As the members began to become more comfortable, they changed the name to YGAL, Younger Gays and Lesbians. With increased openness and more political concerns they further adjusted the name to Queer Kids, and finally established the long-held name of the Fresno Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender and Questioning Youth Alliance. The Youth Alliance, for short has been in continual operation for twenty years.

Arts

Community Link was proud to host a large gay art exhibit, two productions of Last Summer at Bluefish Cove, an all-local, all-lesbian production of this award winning play. Other performing arts

included the plays No Exit and Much Ado About Nothing. Monthly Punk Rock concerts with such groups as Capital Punishment, MDC, and believe it or not Green Day when they were a small Eugene, Or. college band.

Three Centers

The Center was basically one large open space with exposed beams and 244 hot house windows opening the space to light and unfortunately the elements. The large space was extremely hot in the summer and very cold in the winter due to many missing glass panes in the windows, a building built of red brick, concrete floors and no insulation. Not to mention the swamp cooler and small gas heater were never designed to make a space this old and large comfortable for social gatherings.

Remember, it was a large warehouse where trucks pulled in to be loaded.

And while this large wonderful space was a great venue for larger gatherings, it was too huge for small support groups and to operate community services out of. Enter Community Link Too, a store front office space a block and half down the street from the Center.

Other Groups Begin

Other projects, services and activities that found a home at the Center included the first gay People of Color Support Group, The Wimmin's Support Group, Maneuvers (a men's support group), the 40+ Pot Luck group, Saturday Nite Social (a substance free social place), Gay Game Night, Thursday Night Coffee Houses, the Brunch Bunch (Sunday brunches at the Center), Bingo for prizes, Clubhouse after hours and many other social support and fun events.

The Center Thrives

The Community Link Center was a 5,000 square foot open warehouse that used to be the old Fresno Tobacco and Candy Company in the heart of the Tower District. The Center was a wonderful space for large celebrations and events, but not a great place for small intimate groups.

It hosted many large and small community celebrations such as Eddie Ennis' annual Halloween Party, Imperial Dove Court events, Central Valley AIDS Team and Community Link's Black & White New Year's Eve Ball, the Harvest Ball, Valentine's Dinner Dance, MeCHA's 25th year anniversary celebration, Erotica Nights, concerts, parties, and dances.

At the second location it became feasible to conduct a community service based organization and we saw the addition of many support groups, recovery programs and workshops.

One of Community Link's unique services was an employment service ran by a retired former employment agency administrator, Bob Beeler and a committed board member, Randy Carpenter. Through their hard work and dedication, Community Link Too was able to be staffed Monday- Friday from 9 am - 6 pm, answering the numerous daily calls from the community and providing members with

needed information and assistance.

Needing a space between the large Center and the much smaller second space, Community Link sublet a third location for medium size work shops. All three spaces gave Community Link the space it needed for its first 3 years of service.

For almost two years Community Link Too became the office, meeting, and social space for the community. Sadly, it never came close to the original Center.

The End of the Center

Community Link struggled to operate the large Center space for two years while it attempted to get the landlord to comply with our three-year lease agreement and bring the building up to code and complete the change of occupancy the city required. In the end the battle was too emotional, time consuming, and costly for the Center to continue. After meeting for the last time with the inspectors for Fresno City it was decided to leave the building and stop negotiating with the landlord to uphold his part of the lease. It was a heartbreaking decision for many of the board of directors.

In 1991, the focus of the community's needs changed and Community Link made the decision to adjust its priorities and close their physical office spaces, and devote its resources to its service programs, allowing us to create new opportunities.

The strength to Community Link's longevity has been its ability to maintain flexibility and a focus to be responsive to community needs.

Film Festival

In 1995 Community Link incorporated the Gay Film Festival, originally established at Fresno State by Peter Robertson and Ken Fries, under its banner, leadership, and ownership. FIGLEAF, Fresno International Gay and Lesbian Entertainment in Arts and Film, grew and improved by becoming an official Community Link project. After filing a DBA, Doing Business As, the board developed a new mission statement to include the scope of the film festival and applied for funding under the A-Z county tax funding.

The Film Festival moved several times from Fresno State to the Veterans' Memorial Auditorium to the UA Movie theaters and finally found a home at The Tower Theater. The venues were more comfortable and the festival became more successful with every move. It was the shining jewel in our array of services and programs.

Community Link continued to operate the film festival until after the 1998 festival when several individuals within our community conducted a hostile and under-handed take-over of it. For Community Link the pain remains and the take-over of the film festival continues to be the saddest day in our history. Due to Community Link owning the DBA of the Film Festival, FIGLEAF, became Fresno Reel Pride.

Community Link has been able to develop a renewed relationship with Fresno Reel Pride due to the ethical leadership of Jon Carroll and Robin McGehee and their positive continuous outreach to us.

We wish them and Reel Pride continued success.

New Direction

Community Link views one of its main purposes as being educational. Helping non-LGBT individuals develop a better understanding of what it is like to live in a heterosexual world. Building bridges of understanding and cooperation goes a long way in the improving of lives of all Central Valley residents.

One of the services Community Link decided to focus on after closing their office spaces was "Speaking Out" - speaker's bureau. Speaking Out provided discussion panels and individuals to agencies and classrooms that could address a wide array of topics that focused or touched on the LGBT community.

The speaker bureau worked closely with instructors at Fresno State and Fresno City College and conducted a minimum of 70 speaking engagements a semester under the supervision and direction of Community Link's female co-chair Dana Cooper. In its last year of operation, Speaking Out was coordinated by long time volunteers D.S. Zody and Robin McGehee.

Speaking Out had provided trained professional speakers for the Department of Justice on hate crimes. Sensitivity trainings were conducted annually for the Fresno Police Department, the Police Cadet's Academy, and Fresno State's Policing Department.

We assisted semi-professional and professional individuals and agencies in expanding their knowledge and cultural awareness of the LGBT community; and also in training crisis workers at HET, Help in Emotional Trouble's Help Now, to better serve LGBT individuals that were in crisis. Annual trainings were developed for rape counseling services both in Fresno and Kings Counties. We regularly provided training to the personnel in the Health Clinic and the Resident Advisers at Fresno State. The speakers' bureau made presentations at all of the local universities, colleges, and several local high schools.

Speaking Out allowed the student groups at Fresno State and City College to take responsibility for the speakers' bureau as they became more committed and active. Community Link continues to present specially designed workshops and sensitivity trainings for a wide array of agencies and classroom settings.

Youth Outreach Grows

Since Community Link's formation 20 years ago, we have been dedicated to providing services to the GLBT youth 25 years of age and younger, through the Fresno Youth Alliance. The Youth Alliance provides social support through a weekly youth group. The group has met every Friday for the past 20 years, that is roughly 1,050 Friday evenings, well, give or take a few.

Four years ago the Youth Alliance made the commitment to create an additional group and time exclusively for teenagers in Middle School and High School. This group, Teens Only, focuses solely on the achievements and struggles of school-age LGBT youth.

Topics and the focus include, but are not limited to: coming out issues, school harassment, personal safety, dating, and socializing. This special group is every Friday evening from 6:30pm to 7:30 pm. And following this session, youth, teenagers and young adults both, may attend the Friday Youth Alliance group meetings from 7:30PM – 9:00 PM. Talk about a LARGE, exciting and energetic group of young people. The group has been attended by as many as 50+ youth on any given Friday night.

Community Link, in late 2007, entered into a new partnership with Fresno County's Department of Children and Family Services to provide support for LGBT Foster Care youth in a twice-monthly support group. Xpress, an LGBTQ youth group is held every second and fourth Tuesdays.

Speaking of partnerships: the Youth Alliance partnered with the Gay-Straight Alliance Network of the Central Valley to host the Expression Not Suppression Conference on Saturday, February 9, 2008.

In the last two years the Youth Alliance has been encouraging queer youth in probation, foster care, and group homes to be a part of the group. Several local group homes drop off their LGBT and straight-allied youth to the meetings, while other group homes bring their kids and sit in with them to enable their participation. Add to this school counselors and other school staff that help get the youth to these special and important meetings, and it just goes to show how far the youth of today have come from those in the past who needed to hide behind the slightly confusing name "Compass" to be able to be a part of a LGBT youth Group.

Lavender Prom

The Lavender Prom is the annual dance and party for and (mostly) by LGBT Youth and is usually held in May. It's always very well attended as it gives the participants a chance to feel welcome at a prom with their same-sex date. Of course, there is a Prom King and Queen contest.

Double Prince & Princess Pageant is also held nearly every year.

Gray Alliance

On the flip side to the Youth Alliance is the Gray Alliance, a social group for older members of the gay community. The Gray Alliance started in 1997 and was the passion of Clyde Hedstrom, who desired an outlet for Gay and Lesbian members of the community who were slightly more mature. A group where they could come together in a comfortable setting and share each other's company.

Members of the Gray Alliance are more mature, ranging from 50 years & up. You do not have to be exactly 50 years of age to join them, younger people are welcome as well. Their membership is well over 50 members and is constantly growing.

The group is a casual and informal way for gay & lesbian seniors to meet and share conversation, ideas, and experiences. No one is ever obligated to attend all their functions, but all are encouraged to attend at their convenience, as their own schedules will allow.

Gray Alliance meets for a monthly dinner out in the local Fresno area and organizes a monthly potluck dinner at one of their member's homes. Gray Alliance also puts out a monthly newsletter listing

the locations of the dinners, member birthdays, and photos of the previous month's events as well as other interesting tidbits of information. The group is currently organized by two lovely women, Renee and Kay, with a lot of help from their friends.

For his work with Gray Alliance, Mr. Hedstrom is being honored with a Lifetime Achievement Pillar of Support Award at Community Link's 20th Anniversary Gala this month.

Fall Garden Tour

Originally created as an event for those elder and wiser members of our community was the Fall Garden Tour. It was held for a few years on the first Sunday in October and featured interesting or unusual gardens belonging to members of our LGBT community. It would end with a tea reception at Miller Clark Nursery. Due to a lack of gardens and other commitments on our part, the Tour was cancelled the past two years.

Radio Show

Community Link has always had many projects happening, but we needed to find a way to inform those who, for example, could not make their way to the Center to find out about them. Thus a radio show, "It's A Queer Thang" on KFCF 88.1 FM was born.

Airing every third Friday of the month at 5-6pm, the show is a live one, literally. It is a mix of interviews with newsmakers, queer entertainers, politicians, community organizers, and event coordinators. With new queer music highlighted, "It's a Queer Thang" has been mentioned on a couple of musicians' CD liner notes and acknowledgements. Kirk's expertise in studio production (gathered while he worked as a producer at GayRadioNet.com) has made an ever-improving smooth and slick product. In addition to the music and interviews the co-hosts Jeff and Kirk present the news that affect the community and a calendar of the Valley's upcoming LGBT events. The best part of the show are the bloopers, which are then often turned into the show's fresh, cute and humorous jingles. They're voiced over by Kevin Caldwell, our "Jingle Fairy", who is also being honored at the Anniversary Gala with a Volunteer of the Year Pillar of Support Award.

150 Issues of NewsLink

With time, Community Link needed more media outlets, and this time we couldn't count on mainstream press as much as we did on KFCF. We needed our own publication. That was in September 2005.

This month we're celebrating the publication of our 150th issue of the News Link, the LGBT newspaper serving the Central Valley, North and South Valley communities. Since January 2006 covering the entire Valley from Stockton to Bakersfield, the News Link keeps the LGBT community abreast of current news that affects and effects their life. The News Link is a voice and a resource to an underserved segment of the Central Valley going into its 13th year. The focus of the newspaper has changed a little over the past few years with the growing popularity of the Internet: everyone has access

to news instantly, so we've shifted towards better coverage of local happenings, as well as several feature columns.

Website

Our media "empire" also extends to the Internet, with two attempts at a website made in the late 90's before finally coming together in comprehensive format under the domain CommunityLinkFresno.com. You can find there everything about us, read NewsLink online, browse through Pink Pages and check out a calendar of Fresno's LGBT events.

Pink Pages

Long before we had our website, you actually had to get off your couch and get a copy of Pink Pages to get all the information you needed. Community Link has published this business and resource directory since 1992, providing the LGBT community and organizations and agencies that serve us, a great source of information on support groups, recovery services, HIV services, social groups, political clubs, and supportive business. The Pink Pages 2008-2009 Edition and will make its debut at the Fresno Rainbow Pride Parade and Festival. We are currently accepting advertising for that issue.

Fresno Rainbow Pride

Arguably the largest event of the year, and certainly one requiring year-long preparations is our Fresno Rainbow Pride. Community Link formally took over organizing the Fresno LGBT Pride Parade and Festival six years ago. The renamed committee, Fresno Rainbow Pride, has worked hard on bringing back the excitement and integrity of this very important cultural event.

Community Link was a major player in founding LGBT Pride 17 years ago, and during that first year 8 out of the 12 organizers were Community Link Board members. Fresno Rainbow Pride has since grown into a regional event drawing people from all over the Valley to celebrate the contributions of the LGBT community. Expecting over 3,000 people to attend this year's LGBT Pride, this is the largest one-day LGBT event in the Valley.

Currently the committee is looking for new volunteers to fill a variety of positions, especially a committee Secretary to attend and take minutes of the meetings and e-mail them to all members, keep up our mailing lists, help with mass mailings and more. The committee meets every other Tuesday, up to April when we start meeting every Tuesday. Meetings are at GSA Network Office, 932 N. Van Ness. All are welcome!

Fun with Balls

Always looking at providing safe and sane opportunities for the LGBT community to come together and express themselves, Community Link hosts a wide variety of social, educational,

networking, and advocacy programs and events. Queer Volley Ball takes place every Thursday evening between March and October, and additionally every third Saturday. Our newest social activity is the Rainbow Bowling League, with season lasting from the end of October (after volleyball is over) through the middle of March on Thursday evenings at Cedar Lanes.

Our annual Bowl-a-thon is 10% part fund-raiser and 90% FUN raiser held in August. Often organized with outrageous themes such as "Pajama Party" or "Wig Out!", it even has a reward for 'Genetically Challenged' (lowest score).

Volunteers

Community Link and all of the individuals that have made it possible to offer these and other services to the LGBT community for the past 20 years are proud of what we have been able to accomplish. And all of this has been done with an all-volunteer staff. We have no paid employees and donations and community fund-raisers fund our services. We receive no public or governmental funding!

Help Us "Write The Next Chapter"!